The Rhetorical Devices of *The Sutra of Hui Neng*

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The purpose of this paper is to explore three main rhetorical devices employed by the *The Sutra of Hui Neng* in terms of metaphor, pun, and parody. *The Sutra of Hui Neng* records the zen thoughts rather than the language. In the process of explaining the sutra, Hui Neng applied rhetorical devices in a flexible way to make the disciples fully comprehend the zen thoughts, so that Buddhist sutra can be vividly and fully expressed through language.

*Keywords: The Sutra of Hui Neng*, metaphor, pun, parody

**Introduction**

*The Sutra of Hui Neng* is the only Buddhist sutra written by Chinese monk Hui Neng. According to the Buddhist tradition, only the works that describe the Buddhist and his followers can be called “sutra”, and the works of his disciples and descendants can only be called “treatise”, thus it can be seen that *The Sutra of Hui Neng* has a high status and great influence in the history of Chinese Buddhist thought. *The Sutra of Hui Neng* consists of three parts: first, the life story of Hui Neng; secondly, practice and speech of Buddhist sutra; and finally, questions and answers between Hui Neng and his disciples. The core thought of the sutra can be summarized as the Buddhist nature theory of “the mind is the Buddha”, the practice view of “insight is the nature”, and the relief view of “self-nature and self-degree”. *The Vimalakirti Sutra* is the classical basis of his thought. Hui Neng made a series of fundamental changes to the traditional zen at that time, and the zen was finally regarded as the representative of Chinese Buddhist with the development and expansion. Hui Neng is an epoch-making figure in the history of Chinese zen Buddhist. Comparing four main versions of the sutra, Zong Bao version with the most complete content and the most widely circulated is chosen as the main research material. There are a lot of footnotes on the sutra; the most popular one is the revision by Guo Peng in recent years. In order to facilitate analysis, the Zong Bao version used in this paper is the Chinese version published by Hu Nan Publishing House in 1996, and the English version is mainly based on the Zong Bao version, with reference to the 1930 version of Chinese translator Wong Mau-Lam and the revised version of British scholar Christmas Humphreys in 1953.

**Literature Review**

The influence of *The Sutra of Hui Neng* on Chinese literary theory and aesthetics is also very significant. This paper, reviewed the research on *The Sutra of Hui Neng* since the 20th century, summarizes and comments on the basic situation and characteristics of the research in various periods, and holds that the studies can be divided into five periods about *The Sutra of Hui Neng* in mainland China since the 20th century. The fifth period is from the early 1990s up to now. The period of sutra studies show explosive growth. Moreover,
combining Hui Neng and the excellent traditional zen culture contained in The Sutra of Hui Neng with the practical needs of contemporary social life, the study presents a booming period both in the Buddhist and academic circles (Bai & Hong, 2016).

Because of its profound zen philosophy and strong literary charm, The Sutra of Hui Neng has always been valued by Chinese and foreign researchers. There are many monographs and papers on it, covering various fields, such as religion, philosophy, ethics, linguistics, literature and art, aesthetics, pedagogy, and psychology. From the aspect of linguistic research, the achievements on grammar, such as Yao Hongwei (2009) mainly discussed the application of predication, passive sentence, dynamic complement sentence, disposition sentence, analogy sentence, and imperative sentence in The Sutra of Hui Neng by means of description and comparison. Xie Jiexia (2006) studied the 81 adverbs of five categories in The Sutra of Hui Neng.

The achievements on rhetoric and literature, such as Guo Xiaomin (2012) expounded the literariness of The Sutra of Hui Neng from three aspects: stylistic features, language rhetoric, and figure image. Yu Hailing (2011) analyzed the purpose of using of metaphor is not to increase literary talent, but to “use metaphor”, so that their own thoughts can be better understood. The figurative expressions in the original sutra have been reproduced, replaced, or omitted according to the specific situation in the translating process. Zhong Anlin (2018) discussed the figurative use of theoretical analysis of conceptual metaphors, the representative from the perspective of cognitive metaphor and image schema mapping entity mapping is analyzed, thus summarizes involving the zen metaphorical characteristics of the core concepts, analysis of these metaphors to express the concept of metaphor are behind the system, and the use of metaphor for the south zen to interpret and carry forward the role of teaching aims and teaching.

The Stylistic Features of The Sutra of Hui Neng

The stylistic features of The Sutra of Hui Neng are mainly embodied in three aspects. First of all, The Sutra of Hui Neng can be regarded as the first narrative novel in the history of Chinese zen Buddhist. That is because it is a riveting, rocky storyline. The Sutra of Hui Neng mainly introduces the reason and experience of Hui Neng’s learning of Buddhist and recounts how he eventually became a zen master from a wood cutter farmer who did not know words. Although there are several versions of sutra, its contents can be roughly divided into three parts: Hui Neng’s narration of his life, lectures on Buddhist Doctrine, and questions and answers between Hui Neng and his disciples. Through this line of thought, this paper elucidates the zen method of the southern zen, and introduces Hui Neng’s understanding of such problems as prajna, meditation, non-phase, non-thinking, and non-living.

Secondly, another distinctive feature of the style of The Sutra of Hui Neng is the combination of rhyme and loose sentence. Rhyme is a formal style or an article in which the words of the same rhyme are often used as the end of a sentence. Loose sentence refers to the sentence structure which is flexible and full of changes. The length is different, free and lively, vivid and moving. Loose sentences can ease the tone and roll freely. From the perspective of the communicative function of language, loose sentences keep its natural and basic form. People usually use loose sentences to speak and write articles. The appearance of this kind of style, caused a huge impact in the literary world in China, both ideas and forms of expression have been innovated. Among them, the gatha represents the strongest literary characteristic.

Last, The Sutra of Hui Neng is the first work of zen Buddhist for health and well-being. Zong Bao version records the dialogue between Hui Neng and 13 disciples. This style directly influenced the later zen sayings and
the sayings of Song Confucianism.

The function of language as a convenient means and acknowledges that language is a necessary means of expression. However, zen Buddhist has always advocated the highest truth and cannot be expressed exactly with words. In order to communicate, zen has to use language to express before the period of enlightenment. The problem lies in how to express this profound and extensive zen in the limited language and language images, and to enlighten the listener’s understanding. So, zen Buddhist adopts a variety of rhetorical devices, such as metaphor, pun, imitation, parallelism, exaggeration, etc., helping to understand the meaning of eternal and profound zen. This phenomenon is worth further exploration.

### Three Rhetorical Devices

**Metaphor**

Metaphor is one of the oldest and most commonly used figures of speech. The traditional definition of metaphor in rhetoric is: “metaphor, commonly known as analogy, is to seize the similarities of different things according to association, and use another thing to describe the thing to be expressed”.

We often pay attention to the external forms and expression effects presented by metaphors in *The Sutra of Hui Neng*, and can find examples one by one in the text. However, it is easy to ignore the user’s intention. In other words, the specific use intention determines the specific expression form and produces a specific expression effect. Therefore, it is more important to explore the use intention behind the metaphor than its expression effect. There are 34 figures of metaphor used in total 10 chapters of *The Sutra of Hui Neng*. Take the dialogue in “Chapter of Autobiography” as example,

Next day, the Patriarch came secretly to the room where the rice was pounded. Seeing that Hui Neng was working there with a stone pestle, “A seeker of the Path risks his life for the Dharma. Should he not do so?” Then the Patriarch asked. “Is the rice ready?” “Ready long ago”, Hui Neng replied, only waiting for the sieve. (Wong & Humphreys, 1953, p. 18)

This dialogue between Hui Neng and the Patriarch obviously uses metaphor. “Is the rice ready?” The metaphor here is the pounding rice. The implied meaning is to ask whether Hui Neng has seen the nature of self and whether he has become enlightened.

Hui Neng has clearly seen the nature at that time, so he also answered in the way of the Patriarch—“Ready long time, only waiting for the sieve” to convey the implied meaning and achieved level of thoroughly enlightened. They both employ metaphor to make the conversation seem lively and unconventional.

In addition, Patriarch adopted such an obscure and tortuous way of expression to prevent other people from understanding it to the detriment of Hui Neng. The dialogue not only expresses there is a connection between Patriarch and Hui Neng, but also highlights the high level of Hui Neng’s understanding, indicating that the Patriarch intended to heritage to Hui Neng.

According to the statistics of the number of words in each chapter of *The Sutra of Hui Neng* and the metaphor methods used, it is found that the most commonly used figure of speech is the “Chapter Prajna”, because the essence or core of *The Sutra of Hui Neng* is in the second chapter. It can be seen from the following sentences from the “Chapter Prajna”. In order to facilitate the public’s enlightenment, zen master often uses metaphor to convey zen philosophy in images and to convey abstruse in the superficial. Moreover, metaphors of body are common things in daily life, such as waves, rabbit horns, heavy rain, dark clouds, etc., full of life
flavor, which makes the preaching vivid and easy to be accepted, especially for the lower class with low cultural level. For three more examples as following:

Those who recite the word “Prajna” the whole day long do not seem to know that Prajna is inherent in their own nature. But mere talking on food will not appease hunger, and this is exactly the case with these people. (Wong & Humphreys, 1953, p. 37)

Mere reciting it without mental practice may be likened to a phantasm, a magical delusion, a flash of lightning or a dewdrop. (Wong & Humphreys, 1953, p. 39)

By clinging to sense objects, existence and non-existence arises like the up and down of the billowy sea, and such a state is called metaphorically “this shore”; while by non-attachment a state above existence and non-existence, like smoothly running water, is attained, and this is called “opposite shore.” This is why it is called “Paremite”. (Wong & Humphreys, 1953, p. 43)

Pun

Pun, the use of phonetic or semantic connections, deliberately make a word related to two things, so as to have a double meaning, resulting in a speech here and intended for one or both. In general, there are two broad categories—homophonic puns and semantic puns. Homophonic pun refers to the use of the same pronunciation or similar characteristics, so that a word in the literal meaning of one thing, but in the intention of another. Semantic puns, on the other hand, make use of the polysemy of words to make words mean one thing and mean another. These two forms are the same or similar pronunciation, while the semantic meaning of the literal and internal meaning of the difference.

In the dialogue between Hui Neng and the Patriarch in “Chapter Autobiography”, the Patriarch told Hui Neng to leave to avoid being killed after he transmitted the robe and the begging bowl to Hui Neng that night, then personally sent Hui Neng across the river:

The Patriarch ordered Hui Neng into a boat. As the Patriarch did the rowing himself, Hui Neng asked the Patriarch to sit down and he handled the oar. “It is only right for me to carry you across.” The Patriarch said. Then Hui Neng replied, “While I am under illusion, it is for you to get me across; but after enlightenment, I should cross it by myself. Although the term ‘to go across’ is the same, it is used differently in each case” (Wong & Humphreys, 1953, p. 23).

“渡” and “度” are homophonic puns; literalness also have similarities. “渡” means to carry people from one side of a river to the other, and “度” in Buddhist also has a similar meaning. “Polomita” is Sanskrit, which can be translated as “to the other side” or “to the other side”, is to bring all living beings from this side of life and death to the other side of buried nirvana. It can be seen from this that zen Buddhist advocates the “self-nature and self-degree” view of liberation, master is just a disciple into the path of introduction, everyone can understand the Buddha’s intent through their own spiritual experience, direct dialogue with the Buddha, with their own heart to the other side of enlightenment. Another similar example in Chapter Autobiography as follow:

The Patriarch returned, and made no appearance in the hall for several days. The disciples suspected and asked whether the Patriarch was ill or in worries. They were answered: no illness, but the robe and the bowl had been carried to the South. They asked again who inherited them. Hui Neng was the answer, and the disciples were all apprehensive. (Wong & Humphreys, 1953, p. 25)

“能” here refers to Hui Neng, while others think that the Patriarch used the phrase “it is obtained by the almighty” to enlighten the monks and let the monks go to enlightenment by themselves. The double meaning of
“能” is a pun, the Patriarch predicted his inheritor to Hui Neng will be known by the disciples sooner or later, so the implication is Hui Neng; second, the word “能” here can also be interpreted as a person with ability, which contains the meaning of “being able to see nature”. The Patriarch hoped that disciples could “know themselves from their heart and see their nature”, and Hui Neng was the person with ability who had already seen nature.

Parody

Parody is a kind of rhetoric that temporarily creates a new language form according to the existing language expression form in a specific context according to the needs of expression. Generally, the words or phrases imitated by parody are fixed words or phrases, and they can be extended to sentences, paragraphs, chapters, and even styles.

Parody is an important figure of speech in the branch of rhetoric of English linguistics. This is a clever, witty, and interesting figure of speech. It is intended to imitate familiar ready-made language materials, according to the needs of expression to create new words, sentences, to make the language lively, or irony, or humor, full of wit. In the use of imitation is generally known language materials

Parody of figures of speech in the context of zen and call it a “reverse method”. The origin of zen ideology, is only for the creation of “statements” from the language aspect, with negative language potential to reverse the inferences from predecessors, this is the so-called “reverse method”. Hui Neng is not only the master of southern zen Buddhist, but also the founder of “reverse method”.

Most of the poetry gatha are for zen masters to express their understanding of zen realm. One zen master imitates the poetry of another zen master not to play games with words, but to express their different understanding and attitude towards zen understanding. The most typical “reversion method” used in The Sutra of Hui Neng is the famous poetic Gatha by Hui Neng imitation based on the Gatha of Shen Xiu.

The Gatha by Shen Xiu said:
“Our body is the Bodhi-tree,
And our mind a mirror bright.
Carefully we ripe them hour by hour,
And let no dust alight” (Wong & Humphreys, 1953, p. 13).

The Gatha by Shen Xiu said:
“Fundamentlly there is no Bodhi-tree,
No stand of a mirror bright.
Since all is void from the beginning,
Where can the dust alight?” (Wong & Humphreys, 1953, p. 19)

From the perspective of linguistic form, Hui Neng’s reversion is a parody of the original gatha, which is characterized by the use of negative potential in the original sentence. For example, “Fundamentlly there is no Bodhi-tree” versus “Our body is the Bodhi-tree”, and “No stand of a mirror bright” versus “our mind a mirror bright”. The two states of pure mind is conveyed duties different with the use of negative potential on the basis of the original sentence.

The zen thoughts expressed in the Gatha of Shen Xiu focus on the dream to remove the contamination from the human nature. On the other hand, Hui Neng emphasized the purity of human nature. The key lies in coming down to the pure mind and seeing the Buddha without needing to be verified.
Conclusion

While words may serve as an instrument for interpreting and understanding thoughts, subtle truths are beyond words during the period of enlightenment. Once grasp the meaning behind the language, zen must not stick to the appearance of language. Therefore, as a record of the sayings of Hui Neng, grandfathers of zen, *The Sutra of Hui Neng* records the thoughts of the Hui Neng rather than the language. In the process of explaining the dharma to the people, the Hui Neng tried to make the people really understand the beauty of zen thought, and to adapt to what he said, he had to employ parallel, exaggeration, quote, contrast, and other rhetorical devices, so that profound zen can be vividly and fully expressed through language.

References


